

Message Text

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INFO AMEMBASSY ATHENS

C O N F I D E N T I A L THESSALONIKI 0059

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, ELAB, GR

SUBJECT: RISE IN BUS FARES PROMPTS LABOR UNREST IN THESSALONIKI

REF: THESSALONIKI 052

1. DESPITE LAST MINUTE REDUCTION OF BUS FARE INCREASE FROM 1.5 TO 1 DEACHMA, GENERAL STRIKE ORGANIZED BY THESSALONIKI LABOR CENTER AND PROTEST RALLY ORGANIZED FOR FEB 5 BY THESSALONIKI CITY COUNCIL REPORTED REFTEL WERE IMPRESSIVE SUCCESSES. LARGE MAJORITY OF THESSALONIKI BUSINESSES, BANKS AND INDUSTRIES WERE CLOSED FROM 0700 TO 1100 AS SCHEDULED, AND WORKERS ASSEMBLED FOR RALLY IN LARGE NUMBERS (ESTIMATES RANGE FROM 25,000 TO 40,000) IN FRONT OF MAYOR'S OFFICE. BUS COMPANY DID TRY TO BRING OUT BUSES IN MORNING, BUT WITHDREW IN FACE OF PICKETS AND ROCKS IN NUMBER OF MINOR INCIDENTS WHICH RESULTED IN ARREST OF THREE PROTESTERS WHO IDENTIFIED IN PRESS AS EKKE MEMBERS.

2. BUS FARE INCREASE PROVIDED EXCELLENT VEHICLE FOR LEFTIST-DOMINATED CITY COUNCIL TO DEMAND GREATER LOCAL AUTHORITY AND ATTACK CARAMANLIS GOVERNMENT. EFFORTS OF THESSALONIKI LABOR CENTER TO PROTEST INCREASE BY FOUR-HOUR GENERAL STRIKE, IMPRESSIVE IN THEMSELVES, WERE ECLIPSED BY RALLY ORGANIZED
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LATER BY CITY COUNCIL AND LEFTIST GOVERNMENTS OF SURROUNDING

COMMUNITIES WHICH TOOK ADVANTAGE OF EMOTIONAL ISSUE OF BUS FARE INCREASE, AND IDLENESS OF WORKERS INDUCED BY STRIKE, TO PRODUCE LARGE BUT PEACEFUL TURNOUT.

3. FACT THAT GOG APPEARS ON SHAKY GROUND ON BUS ISSUE HELPED ADD LEGITIMACY TO PROTEST. BUS SERVICE FOR THESSALONIKI AND SURROUNDING COMMUNITIES IS PROVIDED BY CLOSED CORPORATION OF BUS OWNERS WHICH WAS GRANTED EXCLUSIVE CONTRACT IN 1957 TO PROVIDE SERVICE THROUGH 1981. ALTHOUGH COMPANY CLAIMED LOSS OF 75 MILLION DRACHMAS IN 1974 TO JUSTIFY FARE INCREASE, IN SAME YEAR IT PAID 18 PERCENT DIVIDEND ON ACTUAL CASH VALUE OF BUS OWNERS' INVESTMENTS. THIS IS MINIMUM GUARANTEED RETURN UNDER THE CONTRACT. THEREFORE, WHEN FARE INCREASE WAS PROPOSED FEW MONTHS AGO, CITY COUNCIL USED IT, AND CHARGES OF POOR SERVICE, TO DEMAND ABOLITION OF EXCLUSIVE CONTRACT AND PUBLIC OWNERSHIP, THEREBY STRIKING BLOW FOR LOCAL AUTONOMY AND PUBLIC OWNERSHIP OF UTILITIES.

4. IT WAS THESE THEMES THAT PASOK MAYOR PAPADOPOULOS STRESSED IN SPEECH FROM HIS OFFICE BALCONY TO MASED PROTESTERS BELOW. FOR EXAMPLE, HE BEGAN WITH, "IF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT, AS PREVAILS IN ALL THE COUNTRIES OF EAST AND WEST, HAD ITS NATURAL AUTHORITY (HERE), THAT WHICH IT MUST AND OUGHT TO HAVE IN A DEMOCRATIC STATE, THERE WOULD BE NO NEED FOR TODAY'S MEETING." HE WENT ON TO REVIEW THE BUS COMPANY OWNERS' PROFITS AND POINT OUT THAT THE EXCLUSIVE CONTRACT WAS SIGNED DURING THE PREVIOUS CARAMANLIS GOVERNMENT. LABOR CENTER DIRECTOR WHO SPOKE NEXT WAS LEFT IN POSITION OF ENDORSING MAYOR'S COMMENTS, WHICH HE DID.

5. FOLLOWING SPEECHES, DEMONSTRATORS MOVED EN MASSE, LED BY MAYOR PAPADOPOULOS AND PROTEST LEADERS, TO PRESENT DEMANDS FOR REPEAL OF FARE INCREASE AND PUBLIC OWNERSHIP OF BUS SERVICE TO MINISTER OF NORTHERN GREECE MARTIS. DEMONSTRATION THEN BROKE UP PEACEFULLY. MARTIS SAID IT WAS A SERIOUS PROBLEM, PROMISED TO SEND DEMANDS TO ATHENS, AND TO ORGANIZE STUDIES ON QUESTION OF BUS OWNERSHIP.

6. COMMENT: LEFTIST CITY COUNCIL OF THESSALONIKI LED BY MAYOR PAPADOPOULOS HAS CONSISTENTLY SOUGHT TO USE LOCAL

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ISSUES TO MOBILIZE ATTACKS AGAINST CENTRAL GOVERNMENT AND ITS POLICIES. ETHYL HELLAS SITUATION IS CONTINUING EXAMPLE OF THIS, BUT BUS FARE INCREASE WAS MOST SIGNIFICANT SUCCESS. PAPADOPOULOS LITERALLY AND FIGURATIVELY CARRIED ISSUE TO CARAMANLIS THROUGH HIS MINISTER OF NORTHERN GREECE, WHO COULD ONLY REPLY THAT HE WOULD REFER IT TO ATHENS, AN UNSATISFACTORY ANSWER TO 25,000 TO 40,000 NORTHERN GREEK DEMONSTRATORS OUTSIDE. IT WAS THE LARGEST PUBLIC GATHERING

HERE IN QUITE A WHILE; AND WE'RE GRATEFUL THE CONSULATE
WAS NOT ON THE DEMONSTRATION ROUTE.
NEGROPONTE

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